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## Let's begin at the end: How a campus bookstore closure set the wheels in motion for a hybrid OER project

Jonas Lamb

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5477-9166>

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# **The Evolution of Affordable Content Efforts in the Higher Education Environment: Programs, Case Studies, and Examples**

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KRISTI JENSEN AND SHANE NACKERUD, EDITORS



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# Chapter 14 - Let's Begin at the End: How a Campus Bookstore Closure Set the Wheels in Motion for a Hybrid OER Project

JONAS LAMB

*by Jonas Lamb, University of Alaska, Southeast ([bio](#))*

## About the University of Alaska Southeast

The University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) is a small, open-enrollment, public, four-year university (Carnegie: Master's Colleges & Universities: Medium Programs) serving a diverse student body of approximately 3,000 students on three campuses (Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka) and online. Southeast Alaska is a semi-remote, rural setting, which affects our students' access to course materials and generally contributes to higher costs of attendance. The main campus in Juneau, the capital city of Alaska, (population 32,269) (AK Dep. of Labor and Workforce Development) enjoys a beautiful setting in a temperate rainforest on the ancestral lakefront lands of the Aak'w'Kwáan Tlingit, one of Alaska's many indigenous peoples, and is home to Egan Library, a regional library serving students and faculty in person and online. The library team includes a Regional Director, four faculty librarians, five full-time staff, 3–5 part-time reference librarians, and 4–6 student assistants.

Overall, our students are nontraditional, with an average age of 31. Fifteen percent are Alaska Native (University of Alaska Southeast, 2016a & 2016b). UAS has a strong student-centered focus, with student success, teaching and learning, community engagement, research, and creative expression among our core themes. UAS has been recognized throughout the state for offering programs of distinction in teacher education, marine biology, Alaska Native languages, business and public administration, and fisheries technology. Classes are taught on campus, online, and through hybrid delivery.

## Let us Begin by Closing

Over the past five years, the University of Alaska system as a whole has experienced reduced state support (~14%

since 2015) (University of Alaska Board of Regents, 2017) and declining enrollments (-28% at UAS since 2012). The latter can be attributed to the closure of a Professional Education Center (professional development and credit granting for K-12 educators), shifting demographics in Southeast Alaska, low college-going rates throughout the state, low unemployment rates, and a state job market that offers high wages without a college education (University of Alaska Southeast, 2017). This resulted in tuition increases as well as a system-wide review of 50 programs for elimination or suspension. As part of the review process, nearly every aspect of the University system was evaluated, and in December, 2014, the brick-and-mortar bookstore at the UAS-Juneau Campus was eliminated and replaced with an online bookstore provided by a third-party vendor.

Following this unpopular closure, the administration proposed donating the existing textbook inventory to the Egan Library so as to reduce the closure's impact on students when they returned to campus in January. Eager to facilitate, the Egan Library agreed to add the donated textbooks to the course reserves collection, which would provide all students on campus with short-term access (three-hour loans) to the materials.

**Prior to the bookstore closure, library course reserve holdings numbered fifty or fewer items, including a mixture of instructor-provided materials and library-owned materials ... The influx of textbooks and the intensive processing involved eventually led to an analysis and complete overhaul of course reserves workflows.**

Prior to the bookstore closure, library course reserve holdings numbered fifty or fewer items, including a mixture of instructor-provided materials and library-owned materials. The donated textbook inventory represented 200 items (new and used), with an approximate value of \$10,000. The influx of textbooks and the intensive processing involved eventually led to an analysis and complete overhaul of course reserves workflows.

As anticipated, students were not prepared for the transition to online book ordering and the associated

shipping time. Use of course reserves increased by 154% from Fall, 2014, to Spring, 2015, largely due to the expanded availability of textbooks. The initial enhancement and expansion of course reserves marked the beginning of library-driven efforts to reduce student costs by addressing textbook affordability and access.

In the spring of 2015, at the annual conference of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), I learned that many other campuses were implementing programs to encourage use of open educational resources (OERs) and library-licensed digital content as alternatives to expensive commercial textbooks. Ironically, I was at the conference to present on the [Digital Public Library of America](#), which has now grown into a major OER repository.

After the conference I returned to campus with new energy and vision for building upon our accidental venture into the realm of textbook affordability. The Egan Library was then in the midst of a program review, and by the end of the summer two new affordability initiatives were identified by library leadership as strategic priorities and were endorsed by the [Institutional Review Committee](#) (IRC). These initiatives, the Alt-Textbook Project (affordable content and OER) and Scholarworks@UA (open access institutional repository), would reduce barriers to attaining course materials for students and provide a centralized, open-access portal to UA faculty scholarship.

Since 2015, Egan Library OER efforts have grown into the UAS Alt-Textbook Project, building on components

of the North Carolina State University Alt-Textbook Project and the University of South Florida Textbook Affordability Program. The project was initially awarded Academic Innovation funding from the Provost's Office for a pilot faculty OER workshop, and now includes these components;

- **Faculty development:** Training, consultation, and support in areas of OERs, OA scholarly publication, and other scholarship of teaching and learning topics through collaboration with a newly established Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching.
- **Library reserves:** In addition to traditional faculty-driven placement of print materials in library course reserves, library staff work from semester book adoption lists to proactively identify and place library-owned materials on reserve.
- **Ebooks for the classroom:** By faculty request and through proactive collection development, the library acquires required course texts when available in unlimited user ebook formats from our preferred vendor. This service is promoted to faculty by liaison librarians and discussed any time faculty requests for materials are received to identify whether the item will be used as a required course text.

## The Problems with Textbooks

The problems with traditional textbooks have been well documented. The average annual textbook cost for college students most frequently cited is \$1,200 per year. UAS students are encouraged to budget \$1,400 for books and supplies. Based on [UAS cost of attendance data](#), books and supplies are comparable to 26% of tuition, and for less-prepared students can be an unanticipated cost.

Locally, in addition to the cost of textbooks, the problem of timely access has been exacerbated by the transition from a brick-and-mortar bookstore to an entirely online vendor with a record for slow delivery. Our students often add/drop courses at the beginning of the term, and the lack of a local bookstore leads to substantial delay in obtaining materials for courses added after the start of term. The 2014 report [Fixing the Broken Textbook Market](#) noted that 65% of students had decided against buying a textbook for at least one class because it was too expensive—an alarming figure. Conversations with UAS faculty indicated their awareness of the issue; in some cases they had begun to rethink their course material selections to accommodate students. A recent survey of UAS faculty, however, revealed that cost was only the fourth most important factor considered (University of Alaska Southeast, 2016c) when selecting course materials. Quality, comprehensive subject coverage, and currency preceded cost as factors when selecting materials, despite a growing awareness of financial barriers facing students.

For over ten years our campus had been wrestling with a variety of measures targeted at improving student retention. Averaged over the last five years, the retention rate for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students is 59%, significantly below the UA system average of 67% (University of Alaska, 2018). Eliminating financial barriers to course materials through affordable content and OER policies, however, has yet to be considered as

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a retention strategy. Interestingly, the UAS-Sitka campus was awarded a Title III grant in 2015 for their project “Complete to Compete: A Holistic Approach to Student Success for Alaska Native and High-Need Students,” which includes OER adoption as a strategy. I’ve been consulted by the campus on faculty development, strategies for facilitating and incentivizing course conversion, and assessment design, and am eager to see the benefits to these high-need student populations.

Recognizing that successful completion of developmental math courses impacts retention of under-prepared, high-need students enrolled in these courses, the UAS Math department experimented with a new approach to providing course materials. One hundred used copies of a previous edition of the course text (current edition, \$100) were purchased (\$4/book) and provided through semester-length library loans at no cost to students on the first day of the course. This minor investment by the department eliminated a significant barrier to student success. While further data is needed to determine the impact of this model on student completion of this course, it’s difficult to imagine that free access on day one would not benefit learning outcomes. Unfortunately, this service hasn’t yet been replicated in higher-level math courses. Math courses at UAS have some of the highest enrollments, making them ideal for conversion to OERs.

## Faculty Development | Pilot Workshop

**With a strong correlation between the cost of attendance and student success, and the negative impact of rising textbook costs on the overall cost of attendance, free and low-cost textbook alternatives (open textbooks, OER, and affordable content) are an effective strategy for student success.**

With a strong correlation between the cost of attendance and student success, and the negative impact of rising textbook costs on the overall cost of attendance (Bell, 2012; [Irving & Roche, 2015](#)), free and low-cost textbook alternatives (open textbooks, OER, and affordable content) are an effective strategy for student success. Despite a growing body of evidence, UAS had not, as mentioned above, considered using an affordable content initiative as a retention measure until the Alt-Textbook Project.

The concept for the project, a component of the Egan Library Teaching and Learning Program, was first developed through the academic program review process. The project’s strategic vision is to provide faculty development and advocacy in order to further increase awareness of OERs and the innovative teaching and learning opportunities these tools can facilitate. The project also aims to support faculty experimentation with OERs, and promote the open sharing of scholarship to remove barriers to knowledge and to foster innovation. The program review process highlighted how the evolving openness in higher education and the sub-initiatives of open access and OERs have been among the top trends in academic libraries since 2014 ([ACRL, 2014 & 2016](#)). At the completion of the Egan Library Program Review, the project was endorsed and recommended for enhancement by the IRC.

Capitalizing on the IRC recommendation, I applied for and received a small Academic Innovation Fund (AIF) award from the Provost’s Office to fund a pilot faculty development workshop introducing OERs and licensed library resources as alternatives to textbooks (i.e., providing course materials at no cost to students). Prior to the workshop, a survey was distributed to faculty to assess baseline awareness and use of OERs. With permission, the survey replicated the questions from *Opening the Curriculum: Open Educational Resources in U.S. Higher Education, 2014*. Findings were used to gauge baseline faculty awareness and familiarity with OERs and to

inform the design of the pilot workshop (held Spring, 2016). To introduce the benefits (in terms of student affordability and academic flexibility) of using OERs, survey results were also shared with workshop participants, at presentations made to faculty at Convocation, and at departmental meetings. Compared to faculty participating in the Babson national study in 2014, UAS faculty surveyed in 2016 were more aware of OERs. Seventy-five percent (n=34) had some degree of OER awareness at that point in time compared to 34.1% (n=2,100 Babson).

Prior to development of the workshop, we had considered becoming a member of the [Open Textbook Network](#) (OTN), primarily with the idea that OTN staff would be better equipped to provide the faculty development workshops. After all, I was still learning the landscape of OER use in higher education. Membership costs, however, proved beyond the scope of the foundling initiative, even after discussing a potential consortial membership with the [Office of Innovations & eLearning](#) at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

Five faculty recruited from the survey participated in the pilot workshop, and represented construction technology, special education, English, and economics. In the first one-hour, hybrid session, they were provided an introduction to OER concepts, repositories, and efficacy research resources. These concepts were also contextualized alongside student costs. Baseline information about each participant's current and typical course loads, enrollments, and textbook costs were collected. Faculty were offered a choice of two incentives for participating in and completing workshop activities: \$250 merit bonus payment or a \$250 Egan Library collection credit for purchasing unlimited access ebooks to be used as affordable content options for required course texts. In this way, the Academic Innovation Funds awarded to the project were passed through to faculty. Despite the modesty of these awards, four of these faculty have become champions for campus affordable content efforts.

In the second half of the session, faculty were given an independent assignment in which they were asked to identify, review, and assess three OERs in their field and identify one scholarly article focused on the efficacy of OER use in higher education classrooms. They were provided with a review rubric (BCcampus OpenEd) and began collaboratively searching for resources with assistance from the facilitator. In the second session, participants shared the OER they'd reviewed, as well as their annotated scholarly articles. Participant reviews and annotations were compiled and shared [online](#).

Participants reviewed the following resources:

- [Comprehensive Individualized Curriculum and Instructional Design: Curriculum and Instruction for Students with Developmental Disabilities/Autism Spectrum Disorders](#) edited by Samuel Sennot and Sheldon Loman.
- [Core-Econ](#) (CORE Economics Education)
- [The Economics of Seinfeld](#) by Linda Ghent, Alan Grant and George Lesica
- [The Fundamentals of Construction Management](#) by Abimbola Olukemi Windapo
- [Leading with Cultural Intelligence](#) (Saylor)
- [Plankton Dreams: What I Learned in Special Ed](#) by Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay
- [Principles of Economics](#) (OpenStax)
- [Writing in College: From Competence to Excellence](#) by Ami Guptill et. al. (Open SUNY)
- [Writing in College: A Short Guide to College Writing](#) by Joseph Williams and Lawrence McEnerney.

University of Chicago Writing Program.

- [Exploring Perspectives: A Concise Guide to Analysis](#) by Randall Fallows
- [Writing for Success](#) by University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

In presentations and info sessions I am sure to share this outstanding resource that employs fair-use of video clips hosted at [Critical Commons](#), “[The Economics of Seinfeld](#).” Using this site as an example of OERs helps illustrate how OERs support innovative pedagogy and transformative re-use of copyrighted material—and can get people laughing.

## Faculty Development | OER Presentations & Consultations

Since the initial pilot workshop, the majority of faculty development in this area has been through one-hour information sessions, individual consultations, invited presentations at school and departmental meetings, and convocation events. Unfortunately, after two years of outreach, I haven’t yet reached the level of engagement needed to shift the direction of this development from the practical, overview level to the pedagogical.

By and large, the most significant progress has been made through informal conversations and consultations with faculty who’ve had their interest piqued at presentations. One presentation to School of Education faculty, at the request of a pilot workshop participant, has helped build a network of faculty champions and early adopters. These faculty serve as the ideal advocates for driving cultural change in education. After all, they are training Alaska’s future K-12 teachers and educational leaders, who have the potential to integrate OERs into their own classroom practices as a result of their experiences as students.

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At Faculty Convocation 2017 I presented on the Alt-Textbook Project alongside the student editor of the school newspaper. The paper ran a [story](#) on the project in the spring of 2017, which caught the attention of student government and led to passage of a [resolution of support](#) for the project. The student editor shared personal accounts of her struggles to pay for her education, even as a self-described “highly-functioning, self-supporting student.” She equated the most recent cost of her textbooks with student wages. As a student working a part-time campus job, she would need to work 20 hours to pay for her \$180 accounting textbook. In comments to the President of the University and elsewhere, she also suggested that the savings realized by students with an institutionalized, policy-supported shift to OERs could be used to mitigate the impact of recent annual and mid-year tuition increases. This presentation caught the attention of several faculty in the Management and Public Administration department. One faculty member was eager to share that he’d been textbook-free in many of his courses for several years, using articles from professional and peer-reviewed collections. This case illustrates the silos that exist on many campuses and can prevent synergistic efforts from aligning. I’ve since met other faculty who have stopped using commercial textbooks for a variety of reasons (cost, endless editions, aggressive publisher marketing) but who weren’t aware of the growing trends of openness in higher education.



## Library Reserves

Students have embraced the expanded course reserve service, borrowing around 1,000 items each semester (Spring 2015–Fall 2017). The average price of the donated textbooks was \$85, with 18 valued at over \$100.

A conservative estimate of student savings, assuming 1/3 (1,666 to account for repeat use by unique users) of

these checked out items (5,000) were purchased by students for \$85, is \$141,600. Because the donated materials were a one-time gift, these substantial student savings unfortunately do not translate to funding for library collections.

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The donated items primarily supported frequently taught, lower-division, on-campus courses, with some outliers from upper-division courses. Many of these texts are used in two course sequences (ie Chemistry 1 and Chemistry 2) offered on an alternating semester schedule. As the donated materials quadrupled the size of our course reserves collection, a major reconfiguration of the available reserves stacks behind the circulation desk was required.

After two years, many of the donated titles are being superseded by new editions or dropped in favor of new materials. The library acquisition budget is insufficient to purchase replacement textbooks. At the end of each term, however, more and more students and faculty are donating their personal textbooks to the library, supplementing and expanding the collection with some new titles and with newer editions of dated titles.

We are investigating a revenue sharing option that could designate a portion of commission earnings from online textbook sales. This revenue would be used to update the library textbook collection. Currently this revenue supports administrative functions of the campus textbook voucher program through the Financial Aid office.

In addition to significant up-front labor for processing the donated materials, the current location of these reserves behind the circulation desk, along with the steady stream of users, have created a labor-intensive retrieval workflow. Self-service reserve models are being investigated.

## Ebooks for the Classroom | Library ebooks

Beginning in the fall semester of 2016, a portion of the library acquisitions budget typically used for faculty purchase requests and general a la carte ebook purchases was committed to support of a new service that was promoted to faculty as “Ebooks for the Classroom.” These resources, while not free, represent affordable content for students. This is one way UAS faculty can address the problem of textbook cost and increase student access to learning materials (with no waiting for books to arrive).

The library is committed to acquiring requested ebooks for classroom support if they are available electronically for institutional purchase from a library vendor in a favorable licensing model (unlimited users or concurrent use). If a limited user option is the only model available, we consult with faculty prior to purchase. In anticipation of high demand for this service, policy states that priority may be given to courses with the highest enrollments. Turnaround time for delivery of access URLs for these resources ranges from a few hours to a few days. In some cases, the requested materials are available in existing ebook collections; this creates a greater impact without additional purchases, returning greater value for these subscriptions.

## Return on Investment

By conservative estimates, UAS faculty electing OER or affordable content (ebooks for classrooms) have saved students \$34,753. For every program dollar spent on these materials, students saved \$8.31. This is in addition to the savings created through expanded library course reserves. The financial benefit to students tends to receive the most attention in discussions of textbook affordability efforts, so I've worked to emphasize these savings in talking points.

### Student Savings Impact | UAS Alt-Textbook Project 2016-18

updated 6/17/2018

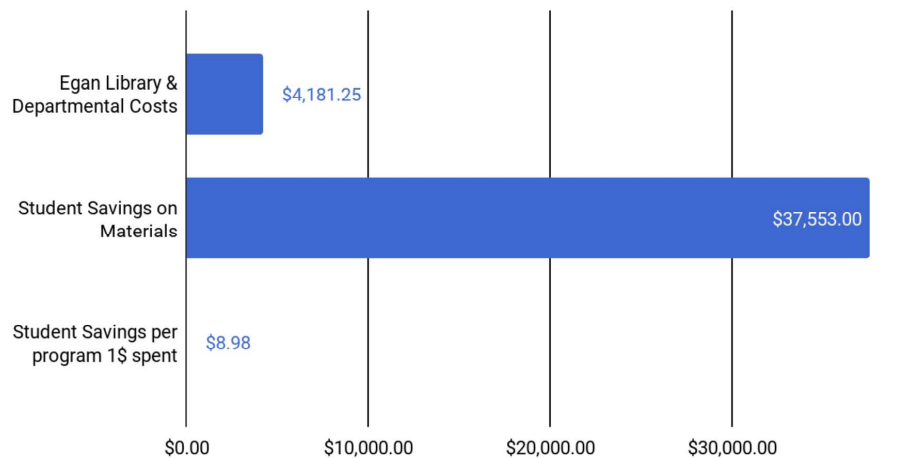


Figure 1: Student Savings Impact

I believe the economic benefits of OERs will help develop campus buy-in for adoption and conversion of a variety of OER materials. However, as the use of OERs increases, I would like to expand the scope of our efforts to include outcomes-based measures from the Open Education Group's [COUP framework](#), outlined below. This level of impact assessment would require new partnerships with the Office for Institutional Effectiveness, the Dean of Enrollment Management, the Chancellor's Strategic Enrollment Task Force, and faculty using affordable content. These partnerships would enable access to student and enrollment data needed for further research, and any significant changes revealed could aid in the development of institutional policies supporting affordable content work, and open up avenues for institutional and external funding. Potential areas of investigation related to the use of affordable content and OERs include changes in:

- The percentage of students receiving a C or better
- Rates of completion
- Drop rates
- Enrollment intensity
- Persistence
- Attainment of progress milestones (e.g., first 15 credits)



- Graduation rates

## Next Steps

I frequently refer to our campus affordable content and OER efforts as grassroots in scope. My intent is not to diminish their impact, but to acknowledge a lack of formalized goals, objectives, philosophies, guidelines, requirements, and timelines. Like many initiatives and programs at small institutions, the Alt-Textbook Project is driven by a few faculty champions (primarily myself and those who have attended my talks or participated in workshops, information sessions, or individual consultations). While some of the appeal of working on textbook affordability is rooted in raising awareness of issues in open education (which can be done without funding), there is a degree of frustration and a limit to what can be accomplished without dedicated budgetary support.

When possible, resources from the library acquisitions budget have been approved and reallocated to make the E-books for the Classroom initiative possible. For this to be a sustainable effort, new funding or a more permanent designation of budgetary resources is needed. Efforts will be first made to secure external funding, as our library acquisitions budget has been cut by 27% since 2016.

In the coming year I will pursue two institutional funding opportunities. First, I will lobby for additional revenue from the campus Strategic Enrollment Task Force on the basis that textbook affordability efforts are an effective retention strategy. Additionally, I plan to apply again for funding from the UAS Academic Innovation Fund (AIF) and to a newly established University of Alaska Faculty Initiative Fund (\$1 million provided by the University), focusing on affordable content efforts and prioritizing the following goals:

- improving access to services in support of student success
- enhancing tools and techniques for student learning and retention
- developing new and creative instructional pedagogies.
- collaborating with other UA institutions (Anchorage, Fairbanks) to replicate affordable content efforts statewide.

Funding would be used to:

- purchase library licensed ebooks requested by faculty for classroom support
- purchase additional required print textbooks for reserves in high enrollment and/or high cost courses
- support faculty with publishing resources, like editorial support and Pressbooks platform access, and stipends for adoption/authoring of OERs.

As the AIF fund is capped at \$2,000 per applicant per fiscal year, I will work with our first faculty author to identify expectations for compensation and support for his contributions, and if necessary work with additional authors to apply for AIF awards in the future. Collaborating with a faculty author to create and publish our first open textbook will be the next project milestone.

Beyond securing funding, I'm interested in working with student government, the Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee, administrators, and the Registrar to explore inclusion of OERs or low-cost designations in our course

schedules so that students can make informed decisions on course enrollment based on complete course costs (tuition, fees, and course materials).

In addition to these efforts to expand the influence of the project, we will continue to provide faculty development in areas of open access, OERs, and affordable content, assist faculty in identifying and evaluating potential low- or no-cost materials to replace commercial texts, and build campus partnerships to measure the impacts of the work.

## Lessons Learned

There are a number of lessons learned during the development of our program that may be valuable to others considering a similar effort.

**One size doesn't fit all.** Certain subjects, primarily in the humanities and literature, are under-represented in the selection of open textbooks available. While sufficient coverage for these subjects is available via other OER content types, I've observed that faculty perceive textbooks as the easiest OER type to adopt. A lack of open textbooks for some subject areas might make this work more challenging in some cases.

**Consider the cost.** Faculty consultations which reveal a lack of subject area coverage have raised awareness of the affordability problem and led to emphasis on cost consideration when selecting commercial course materials. These consultations may also plant the seed for future conversations about a wide range of affordable content options.

**Course preparation time is precious.** Faculty appear more likely to convert a new course rather than one in which they have an investment and history and have based existing curriculum on a commercial text. Unfortunately, the existing courses tend to have high enrollment, with multiple sections and instructors, and adoption of OERs could have a major impact on student cost.

**Though it feels like I've long been a lone champion on campus, it's only been two years and I'm beginning to make ripples and find allies. Those of us working in this arena are working against a legacy of commercial publishing and the significance placed upon key textbooks. Even small changes can have an impact and lay the groundwork for future changes.**

**Change making is slow.** Though it feels like I've long been a lone champion on campus, it's only been two years and I'm beginning to make ripples and find allies. Those of us working in this arena are working against a legacy of commercial publishing and the significance placed upon key textbooks. Even small changes can have an impact and lay the groundwork for future changes.

## Conclusion

While the closure of a bookstore is not the ideal beginning to a story, that controversial decision on our campus set the wheels in motion for culture change at the University of Alaska Southeast. The impact of the Alt-Textbook Project extends beyond reducing student cost-to-completion, initiating necessary conversations about teaching and learning, equity, and information privilege.

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## Author Bio:

**Jonas Lamb** is Public Services Librarian and Associate Professor of Library Science at the University of Alaska Southeast. He provides leadership for the UAS Alt-Textbook Project and One Campus, One Book (common reading program) and serves on Faculty Senate and the First-Year Experience Committee. Prof. Lamb received his

M.S., Library and Information Sciences, Drexel University (2008), B.A., General Studies, University of Michigan (2003) and is currently pursuing an M.F.A., Creative Writing & Literary Arts: Poetry from the University of Alaska Anchorage.